

# Russia and Putin in 2012

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December 29, 2012

Recent events in Russia have created a crisis for the ruling regime of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The large demonstrations, the first of their kind in years in Russia, following the fraudulent parliamentary election in early December, suggest that Russia's presidential election in March, in which Putin was expected to easily win election as president again, will not go as smoothly as Putin had hoped. Putin will have to work hard to regain his authoritarian rule over the country and avoid further damage to his weakened regime.

While it is clearly too early to know what will happen in Russia, there are several aspects to the current situation in Russia which could become increasingly significant as the current political crisis in Russia unfolds. First, when faced with a domestic political crisis, leaders often seek to identify an external enemy at whose feet to lay the blame for internal problems. This can take the form of rhetoric and propaganda, but it can also manifest itself through military actions. The Russian regime has already sought to increase its anti-American rhetoric, as it has done periodically throughout the last decade or so. This time, this approach has not been very effective. Efforts by Putin to depict the demonstrations as a western conspiracy have largely failed.

It is still possible that Putin will pursue a more dangerous route by seeking to bolster his regime through a conflict with one of Russia's many neighbors. The most obvious candidate for this type of conflict would be Georgia. Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008; and tensions and animosity between the two states and their leaders remain quite high. Additionally, Russian troops remain in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions that are viewed by Georgia, and most of the rest of the world, as part of Georgia. The possibility of conflict between these two states is exacerbated by the presence of a hyper-nationalist regime in Tbilisi that is also battling decreasing popularity and growing domestic opposition. Any conflict between Russia and one of its neighbors could be devastating for the countries involved and, particularly if it involves a country like Georgia, could pull the U.S., in one way or another, into another far flung conflict.

A second aspect to the recent events in Russia is that it not only has created a crisis for Russia's regime, but has raised similar questions and concerns for other non-democratic leaders in the region. In recent years, Russia has emerged as a model for semi-authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes throughout much of the former Soviet Union. These regimes have learned much about how to limit free media, crack down on freedom of expression and assembly, co-opt political opposition, and distribute private wealth among supporters of the administration from Russia. As leaders from Belarus to the Caucasus to Central Asia see that Putin's regime is imperiled they will soon understand that their own non-democratic regimes may not be as stable as they would like. These regimes, depending on how things develop in Russia could crack down further on opposition, or, more unlikely, begin to liberalize in order to hold on to some power a little longer. In either case, if Putin does not survive his travails in Russia, leaders throughout the

region will be forced to reevaluate their own policies and ambitions for remaining in office indefinitely.

If Putin is unable to maintain in power in Russia, it will also raise some questions for U.S. policy in the region. The end of Putin's powerful and oppressive regime would raise the possibility of further democratic development in Russia. This would create a strong impetus for greater U.S. involvement and expenditure in Russia. However, the U.S. has invested in democratic development in Russia in the past and met with little success. The end of the Putin regime would create an opportunity for more democracy in Russia, but there would be no guarantees.

The U.S. has a long and mixed record of supporting democracy and human rights in Russia. The end of the Putin regime would be a great opportunity to pursue the next phase of this endeavor, but it also represents an opportunity to learn from previous mistakes and recognize how agonizingly slow and difficult democratic development in Russia can be. Moreover, the U.S. no longer has the resources needed to commit fully to building democracy in post-Putin Russia, should it come to that.

The resolution of the current crisis of the Russian regime will have an impact far beyond Russia. It could frame political developments and even conflict between states in the former Soviet Union for the next several years and may force the U.S. to rethink and reevaluate its own Russia policy. Putin's Russia has created numerous challenges for the U.S., but the transition away from Putinism, should it occur, while welcome, will raise a different set of challenges.